

Private Security Contractors Head to Gulf

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Companies in the Gulf Coast area hit by Hurricane Katrina are turning to an unusual source to protect people and property rendered vulnerable by the storm's damage -- private security contractors that specialize in supporting military operations in war-torn countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan.

The mission is to guard against looters, not fend off coordinated insurgent attacks. But the presence of the highly trained specialists represents an unusual domestic assignment for a set of companies that has chiefly developed in global hot spots where war, not nature, has undermined the rule of law.

North Carolina-based Blackwater USA, for example, has 150 security personnel in the Gulf Coast region. The company, which provided personal security for the head of the Coalition Provisional Authority and continues to have a large presence in Iraq, began by donating the services of a helicopter crew to help the Coast Guard with rescue efforts. But it since has added commercial clients that either have buildings in the region, such as hotels, or are sending employees there to help with the reconstruction.

"The calls came flooding in. It's not something that we went down and tried to develop," said Chris Taylor, Blackwater's vice president for strategic initiatives.

ArmorGroup International, a British company, has about 50 employees in the Gulf Coast. Most of the work came from existing clients that wanted security quickly as looters ran rampant through New Orleans last week, according to George Connell, president of the firm's McLean-based North American division.

Although it's not likely to become a major source of business, private-sector firms that specialize in rapid response to dangerous situations probably can have more of a role in a domestic disaster's wake, said Doug Brooks, president of the International Peace Operations Association, a trade group.

"I think a lot of people are complaining about how long it took the federal government. But certainly these private companies are always ready to go," he said.

Peter W. Singer, an expert on private military contractors at the Brookings Institution, said he thinks the presence of such firms is "overkill" when firms that perform more conventional security work are available.

"This is not a war zone. The potential threats that might be faced are not insurgents armed with mortars and machine guns attacking convoys," he said. "This was basically looters and a small number of ne'er-do-wells taking potshots."

Blackwater's Taylor said local authorities are notified when company employees move into an area. So far, he said, none of his workers has had to take any action; the idea is that their presence should be enough. "We're saying to potential looters, 'This is a place you don't want to be right now,' " he said.

ArmorGroup's Connell said that so far, the most his employees have had to do is advise a television crew to leave the convention center area after the mood there turned ugly late last week.

Connell said that unlike in Iraq, where armed security is a necessity, private security in the New Orleans area is mostly needed to make people "feel better with a linebacker-sized guy with you."

He said the employees he has dispatched to the Gulf Coast are typically Americans who have retired from law enforcement jobs. They are armed with pistols and dressed in khaki pants and blue polo shirts. "They're licensed, mature people," he said. "On balance, they're sort of an older crowd than people we have in hotter spots around the world."

In Iraq, where private security contractors number about 20,000, they're usually former military personnel, and most are equipped with heavy weaponry.

Homeland Security Department spokesman Russ Knocke said he knows of no federal plans to hire private security, though he would not rule it out. "We believe we've got the right mix of personnel in law enforcement for the federal government to meet the demands of public safety," Knocke said.